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Chapter Eight

CHARACTERISTICS, GAMES, AND MEASUREMENTS

THE REAL NUER

• 157 THE Nuer improves upon acquaintance. At first sight his better qualities are hidden from the casual glance and his body is anything but beautiful in its usual grey coating of cow-manure ashes. But to know the Nuer is to love him; for as one becomes acquainted with him he will begin to trust you, and you may penetrate the surface mask of reserve and find a depth of finer qualities within.

The favourite expression of a Nuer when asked a question which he does not care to answer is 'I do not know'. But as one becomes better acquainted with him he becomes willing to confide in any one whom he respects.

I have found refinement, consideration for others, courtesy, and faithfulness, as well as many other qualities, not only dormant but active in many Nuer.

153 151 The Nuer, probably because he has never been able to write, has a splendid memory, and is a good talker and imitator. He may relate some conversation he has heard and imitate each person in tone and manner. He can also imitate birds and animals.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

264 When the Nuer eat they always use a common dish, and if one person is late to the meal, they await his arrival before beginning to eat so that all may share alike. Likewise, if one has had sufficient food and stops eating before the food is finished, the others ask him why he does not eat more before they proceed to finish their meal, eating the remainder of his portion of food.

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We have had several small thefts of fruit at the mission, and Nuer living on the compound have assumed the part of self-appointed police without any idea of material gain for themselves. They have occasionally assumed such responsibility for the property of the white man as to make it necessary for them to declare a Nuer—even a relative—to be a wrongdoer. 577

A Nuer is faithful to his family and tribe, remembering his obligations to them and knowing that he may be sure of their support in times of urgent need. This pride in his tribe must not be undermined. Age-old customs and teaching have given him a heritage of which he may well be proud. 577 621

As the white man and the Arab mingle in his life and as western civilization touches Nuerland may the good in the Nuer remain undestroyed. May he not become dissatisfied because his ways are not those of western nations, but help to make his tribe better because he has lived in it. We must be careful not to designate as evil everything that is not part of our western civilization. If we teach the Nuer of Christ and they follow in His way, He will perfect their lives. 600

POISE

You cannot hurry a Nuer unless you can give their war cry—which brings immediate action. 157

Nuer have been taken to Khartoum, and while they were amazed at all the wonderful (to them) things which they saw, no one who saw them on the street could have guessed any of their thoughts by their actions. They were quiet and self-possessed amid surroundings that were entirely strange to them. One boy was even heard to remark that 'Khartoum had nothing to boast of, except that it did not have mosquitoes'.

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#157 I have seen a boy about sixteen years of age save a little girl from drowning. In less than a minute afterwards he was nonchalantly taking a bath, less concerned outwardly than if he had brought a fish out of the river instead of a human being.

The Nuer often asks for one thing or another, such as a safety pin, a piece of cloth or thread. Sometimes one is inclined to think that he wants something continually. But when one sees their meagre possessions one is surprised that they do not ask for more than they do.

FAITHFULNESS

One Nuer showed his faithfulness to his white friends in a way which caused him to give up his own cherished plans and take a long walk.

He had accompanied some of the missionaries in their launch to Malakal, a distance of about 200 miles. They were *en route* to Rejaf and were to board the Nile steamer at Malakal. He intended to buy some cattle and had been counting a great deal on this trip for several months.

As the Nile steamer left for the south at midnight a telegram was given to this Nuer and he was shown how to send it. The next morning he appeared at the post office with the telegram (post office and telegraph office are usually housed together in many places in the Southern Sudan). The postmaster—seeing the signature to the telegram—asked him if he was 'a person of the preacher's?' He replied 'Yes'; so the postmaster—a black man—asked him if he would take the post-bag to the mission. He thought of the cattle he wanted to buy, of this trip he had planned for so long, but he also thought of his white friends and of the eagerness with which they always welcomed the post-bag. So he immediately said 'Yes', he would take it. He gave his name to the postmaster, and

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157 received the heavy post-bag, for belated Christmas presents made it weigh more this time than usual.

The only thing that did not occur to him was that there might be any other preacher than the one at Nasser. He set out on his return trip to Nasser afoot, carrying a heavy bag of post—belonging to the Doleib Hill Mission which is about fifteen miles overland from Malakal, instead of to the Nasser Mission two hundred miles up river.

But he was blissfully ignorant of his mistake, and after a walk of seven days' duration, he delivered the Doleib Hill post-bag at the Nasser Mission, confident that there ought to be enough post in that heavy bag to gladden the hearts of all his white friends for some time.

He was deeply chagrined when told of his mistake. But possibly the memory of what he was willing to do for them will remain to gladden the hearts of his white friends longer than any news they might have received in that post-bag—had it been theirs.

Another Nuer, who knew how to steer the launch, showed his faithfulness to us by steering the launch all night when a hurried trip had to be made owing to illness. And later, even though Nuer are much averse to being close to dying persons, he would be found sitting on the porch outside the sickroom so that the nurse within—sitting by an unconscious, dying woman—might not feel so entirely alone. He had not been asked to stay there, he was not even expected to do so, but all he said was that he thought he would stay there so that the nurse might not feel entirely alone. It does not sound worth much—unless you are the nurse, alone with a hopeless case in the African stillness after midnight.

NUER GAMES

524 Boys make cattle out of mud, colouring them with ash or charred wood. They curve the horns and show quite a